Improving student's Performance in English as Language of Learning and Teaching in Teacher Pre-service Education

Liesel Hibbert
John Wankah Foncha*
Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa

*Corresponding author

Abstract

This paper explores the necessity of a good knowledge of the language of teaching and learning (LOLT) in English for student-teachers in South Africa. The study reported in the paper focuses on communication skills and academic reading and writing skills: with defamiliarization as a research method. Defamiliarization creates a space free from fear and anxiety in which students can express themselves. Third-year students were asked to write a report based on their experiences in their major teaching subjects which form the data in this study. Students were also asked to write a needs analysis and state what they learnt during the report writing project. Multilingual glossing was a compulsory component in order to match the realities of school classrooms which had various language groups. The results showed that students engaged and participated; leading to conscious critical awareness and development. Student performance improved in English as language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in teacher pre-service education, and in their specialised teaching subjects. The study concludes that defamiliarization did create a space for student's ability for reading and responding to texts as well as building self-confidence in their ability to synthesise information. It is therefore envisaged that through a community of inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000), students can collaboratively develop problem-solving techniques.

Keywords: discipline-specific knowledge, English as language of learning and teaching, teacher education, defamiliarization as a research and a pedagogy, community of inquiry

Introduction

The subject Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) is a compulsory subject for all senior phase and further education training (FET) students from year 1-3. There are 2 periods (1 and a half hours) per week allocated to the subject at Faculty of Education in CPUT. The purpose of the subject is to enhance the expertise of the students to be able to teach through the medium of English. LOLT has poor status in the eyes of the students: most of them do not take the subject seriously and as such have a negative attitude toward it and tend not to attend classes . Boughey and McKenna (2016) show that

student understanding of, and ability to adapt to academic literacy is an important factor for a smooth transition into higher educational institutions (HEI). Current matriculants' standard of writing is not where it should be after 12 years of basic schooling. This factor becomes problematic when students cannot cope with the standard of reading/writing expected at a HEI.

The diverse nature of classrooms leads to the use of many languages simultaneously; known as translanguaging which in this case is the process where multilingual users employ languages in an integrated way. Prominent among the official languages used in the Western Cape classrooms are English, Afrikaans and IsiXhosa. Translanguaging can be defined as "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system" (Canagarajah, 2011: 401). Translanguaging is the use of a complete language repertoire in order to:

- make oneself understood
- convey a certain nuance of meaning – creativity, criticality (Wei, 2018)
- make sure one is understood
- contrast and compare different language phenomena
- mix all their languages freely according to the situation and your current needs
- come up with cultural hybridity
- create a "new whole" by using the different languages simultaneously

Translanguaging is the process of meaning-making and sense-making drawing from different repertoires, semiotic and cognitive resources. It challenges boundaries between language and human cognitive abilities (Wei, 2018). Translanguaging, according to Garcia and Wei, differs from the notion of code-switching in that it refers not simply to a shift or a shuttle between two languages, but to speakers' construction and use of original and complex interrelated discursive practices that cannot be easily assigned to one or another traditional definition of language, but that make up the speakers' complete language repertoire.

The intention of the particular version of LoLT as offered by the researchers is to create a classroom atmosphere where translanguaging is accepted as the norm. LOLT was meant to create a translanguaging space (Wei, 2018) and to invite students to participate in metalinguistic discussions by contrasting and comparing other languages. Translanguaging helps to develop the four language skills that are required by every teacher: it can be argued that:

> to make the language learners sustainably multilingual, the present time foresees: a) teaching language by linking it to its cultural context; b)

> teaching the 21st century skills, such as ways of thinking (creativity and innovation, critical thinking, decision making), ways of working (communication, collaboration), tools for working (ICT literacy), and living in the world (citizenship: local and global, cultural empathy) … It is generally accepted that functioning of every language system is based on a potential of the multilingual competence, thus, current theoretical contributions relate the notion multilingualism to the notion multicompetence. Assuming that multilingualism conveys the language users' ability to demonstrate regular use of several languages in day-to-day interactions, multicompetent individuals or social groups of language users are expected to possess the knowledge of an extended linguistic repertoire, which enables them to apply an appropriate language variety for an appropriate purpose and in a relevant context. (Rozina, 2015: 96)

Developing a third space through defamiliarization is possible; one void of anxiety and fear. This practice is in line with the constructivist perspective of learning where knowledge is a co-construction of the interlocutor (Sivasubramaniam, 2015).

As part of the teaching material for LOLT, a book designed for Business English was used with the students, but this has now been phased out because it was inappropriate. In the absence of a perfect alternative at present, and the reality that students do not purchase books, we were presented the opportunity to design a process that students can work through which addresses both the often-thin content knowledge of students, as well as their language performance in writing. Among the chances created is an important learning trajectory, the introduction to research skills as well as an enhanced awareness of how knowledge is created, perpetuated, and may be questioned in specific tools which were made available to students.

Questions which the teaching of this subject has raised for us over the last two years, since the prescribed curriculum outline is vague, include:

- What should the subject called LOLT teach to pre-service teachers?
- What general knowledge of current issue in the SA context should all pre-service teachers be familiar with?
- What specialist subject knowledge do students struggle to master/understand?
- How does one prompt students to produce nothing less than 'informed' responses and opinions?
- Is the ability to critically interpret what they read, a challenge for them and how can that be addressed in this experiment?
- How does one turn deficit model around, in terms of student confidence, agency, and voice?

To enable us to address the above challenges, we initiated a research process in the curriculum, designed for students to build conceptual knowledge and understandings around current issues and subject specific knowledge and perspectives which might build confidence and English language competence.

Literature Review

The principal focus of this literature review is defamilairization which is in favour of the transliteracies framework for English language teacher language awareness (Hibbert, 2018: 81). Transliteracies refer to a "pedagogy which takes as is given and addresses overtly, the complexity of social codeswitching, code mixing and code meshing" which is a reality in all higher institutions. Based on its social affinity, a discursive space is created in the classroom as a learning space of enquiry. The intention is to create a strategic classroom organisation that may facilitate or create collaborative learning in the form of group work (Freedman, 2007). When third-year students were given the task to write a report, the main aim was for them to first understand what was required from them based on the rubric before actually translating this action into words. Through this defamiliarization process, students grew curious about varieties of discourses in English concerning their areas of specialisation (Hibbert, 2018). Recognising transliteracies framework includes translanguaging and transculturalism which was evident in the student works. While familiarity is an enemy, defamiliarization forces us to look afresh at a certain phenomenon.

Enhancing Teaching Language Across the Curriculum

In South Africa the minimum requirement to pass the National Senior Certificate (NSC) in home language is 40%, while the minimum requirement for higher education in home language is 50%. Results from the Benchmark Test Project National Report of 2016 showed that the academic literacy levels of students intending to study teaching were low and that these students attained only basic levels of reading and writing due to their poor literacy skills. A major concern highlighted in this report was that these learners who envisage studying teaching were ultimately confronted with numerous challenges; one being their lack of preparedness for the rigorous demands of higher education. This is echoed strongly in Jansen's lamentation as follows:

> If I had a choice with my own children today, I would seriously consider not sending my child to school in South Africa for one reason: I do not trust a system that makes it possible for a child to pass grade 12 with 30% in some subjects and 40% in others subjects. I would be filled with fear when I discover that you can get 32% in Mathematics and 27% in Physical Science and still get an official document that says you can continue to study towards a Bachelor Degree at University. I would

> worry myself senseless when I enrol my child in Grade 1 knowing that she could be among the half a million children who would not make it through to Grade 12. I would be horrified at the possibility that the principal might force her to Mathematical Literacy because someone decided she could not do pure Mathematics, because it would make the school pass average to look bad. And I would be angry when I find that she is guaranteed to be among the 76% pass rate for Life Orientation when all the other subjects in the Senior Certificate have pass rates way below this number. (Jansen, 2012,: 1)

Based on this quotation, Jansen (2012) goes further to say that it is extremely difficult to fail Grade 12 in South Africa today. For one to fail Grade 12, that person has to put in a special effort to bunk classes, deliberately provide wrong answers to questions or hand in a paper very early during an examination session and then that person will fail. This gives us an image of the kind of students that we receive in the universities who are not properly prepared for HEI. This poor preparedness is hardly acknowledged in the major newspapers because of the questionable 70% pass rate from the Department of Basic Education (DBE). It is needful to stress that South Africa has never had the kind of distinctions produced today (quantity with no quality). Jansen asserts that the evidence of poor formation lies in the fact that most of the Grade 12 students with distinctions struggle to pass in the first year of the University. While the matric results get stronger, students over the years have become weaker; leading to poor throughput at the universities.

When we ask students how long they will spend on our assignment, they normally say 2-3 hours, where we are expecting 6-8. This is always a good eye-opener for them and when they do it, it brings in good marks, which empowers and motivates them. This meta-text or meta-conversation alongside the teaching of content, we find, most valuable. The “Reading to Learn” initiative led in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa by Mike Hart, is spreading like wild-fire. Its impact has been positively assessed in many African countries as well as in South Africa. Mike Hart quotes David Rose as follows: “You can’t write what you can’t read.” He explains: ‘Being able to write something which you have understood in your own words, must be extremely satisfying to the learner. Praise needs to follow, so that learners are shifted to a more intense level of engagement (Foncha, Abongdia & Kepe, 2018).

In order to refocus on pointing out positive progress that is being made, postcolonial texts, particularly those produced by young African and South African authors, are currently being reviewed and being selected for inclusion as prescribed literature alongside similar, or traditional literatures from other continents. This selection will presumably have positive spin-offs for literature eventually prescribed in schools. Secondly, most South African universities are appointing teaching and learning specialists. Thirdly, students are increasingly exposed to academic readings and interpretive techniques and

raising pertinent questions regarding the current status quo in education. Critical views can come up, if the prompts are presented. It only takes one round of teaching for this to be understood by students. Often they don't know that they are allowed to question us, or that it is indeed required that they do. Fourthly, discourse analysis principles for analysing discourse patterns are being woven into the curriculum, to demonstrate to students that each text you may read is structured differently, but according to conventions of a particular genre. Fifthly, translanguaging (interlanguage), the spectrum between regulated and mediated texts (such as academic essays, and unregulated spaces (newspaper articles, comics and graffiti) are being overtly addressed. Mike Hart related how he used a surfing magazine to get his high school learners interested in features of genre differentiation.

Another point of progress is that tutorial support staff is being considered in order to enlarge the feedback cycle for students and to provide more individual scaffolding for the reading writing processes students are asked to participate in.

According to Piller (2016), what we see is always influenced by our expectations and by what we believe and already know. In light of this, English monolingualism tends to blindfold our modern ways of seeing multilingualism even in contemporary research. Multilingualism from Piller's viewpoint appears to be generic and context-free. This is meant to suggest that non-language specific linguistics that only engages in teaching and research practices tacitly equate language to English. This is resonant in the following quotation:

> Not only do academic linguists in the English-language tradition subscribe to the assumption that they do not need to know specific languages in order to conduct research on 'language,' they frequently even take pride in NOT knowing languages and lampoon the idea that an academic linguist should know a number of languages as silly and misguided … Asking a linguist how many languages they speak is like asking a doctor how many diseases they have.(Piller , 2016, 28)

Multilingualism is therefore being obscured in language research as highlighted by Pavlenko (2014, xi) in the following quotation:

> In reality, there is no such thing as the bilingual mind: bilinguals vary greatly in linguistic repertoires, histories, and abilities, and the bilingual mind appears here as an umbrella term to refer to a variety of speakers, including multilinguals.

This way of seeing multilingualism is perceptually flawed because in academia, citations are usually in the English language only, which is LOLT in most South African Higher Education institutions. It is in this light that Piller and Takahashi (2011) argue that social inclusion policies fail to embrace

multilingualism in the real sense but in the sense of Monolingual Multilingualism which promotes language ideologies and practices that speak to diversity.

Although multilingualism may be an asset in educationgenerally, Haukas (2015, 12) states that it could be a deficit for students. This may be true in situations where students are illiterate in their home language or in the case where students are not aware of the benefits of multilingualism or in a situation when they are not encouraged in school to rely upon their different language repertoires as resources (Moore, 2006). In view of the benefits of multilingualism, Cook (1992) argues that the different languages in our brains are interconnected in a way that they influence one another.

The rationale for introducing monolingual multilingualism and its association with translanguaging is to examine their affiliative aspects in light of this paper. Any conceptualization of students' competence accruing via the normative route of teaching is minimally informative and maximally redundant (Sivasubramaniam, 2004). Based on this, an alternate framework can facilitate and foster student agency and voice as manifestations of competence.

The study is premised in Hibbert and Dippenaar's (2018) community of practice framework based on the social constructivism theory of Vygotsky (1978, 1979). In light of this, Hibbert (2018, 18) argues that a study of this nature focuses "upon less tangible yet essential skills which develop students into critical and emphatic thinkers [that] ultimately creates social cohesion", one of the millennial goals of South African Education systems. Discursive spaces are created to ease collaborative learning in resonance with defamiliarization. According to Hibbert and Dippenaar (2018):

> The community of practice framework views any communicative situation in an institutionalised learning context as a coming together of multiple discourses around a specific task. According to the framework, learning communities are communities in which certain practices originate, and are developed, perpetuated and discarded, or adapted with the intention of moving them forward. … This implies that the aim of language education for enhanced equity in South Africa would be that of meaningful connections of individuals to each other in loosely formed communities. Within the classroom, these communities are ideally created with a life-long aim of carry-over into community-building in civil society and schools. (p. 64)

The community of practice in this case is LOLT 3 consisting of the lecturers and the students who form part of a larger community, CPUT. In line with constructivism, Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry framework integrates three elements, overlapping "presences", to reach successful educational experiences in HEIs. These elements are:

1) cognitive presence,
2) social presence and
3) teaching presence.

Garrison et al. (2001) view the cognitive presence within the Community of Inquiry framework as the degree to which learners can construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and dialogue with one another, and the course content. Garrison et al. (2001) categorised the cognitive presence into a four-phase process of practical inquiry that constitute:

- a triggering event, which refers to when an issue or problem is identified and needs to be resolved
- exploration, which is when students explore the issue both individually and corporately through critical thinking and dialogue;
- integration, where learners move from a higher level critical thinking to developing own ideas; and
- resolution, in which case learners apply the knowledge gained in an educational context.

The study is based on our experience with third year Senior Phase and Further Education and Training (SP&FET) students in the Faculty of Education. Given the interpretive nature of the study:

> We imagine, therefore, that in the construction of narratives of experience there is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story and reliving a life story. As researchers, we are always engaged in living, telling, reliving and retelling our own stories. Our narratives of experience as Jean and Michael are always ongoing ones. We live our stories in our experiences and tell stories of those experiences and modify them through retelling and reliving them. The research participants with whom we engage also live tell, relive and retell their stories. (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, 160)

Methodology

Sivasubramaniam (2004) debunks the temporal, objective, context-free popular beliefs that traditional SLA theorists rely on in teaching English. In view of this, maximizing students' competence in LOLT would be contingent on our using socially-informed and socially-attuned approaches for fostering their voice and agency which this paper seeks to explore.

Teaching research process

All first, second- and third-year students of SP/FET Department of the Faculty of Education, CPUT have to do LOLT. That requirement indicates large groups which is why group projects are introduced to minimize marking. The subject is largely taught by part-time staff, who have no real buy-in to student progress or institutional connections. They are disconnected in that they do not have offices, do not have computer access on a regular basis and are not specialists in any subject, but rather ex-school teachers.

There were two steps in the process which we introduced at third year level. The teacher pre-service curriculum indicates that research skills are essential but it is not overtly taught in any mainstream subject area, which prompted us to experiment with it in the LOLT course, specifically introduced to develop English language competence across the curriculum. This does not however mean that students are automatically highly motivated. On the whole, the value of the research component to them could be assessed only in retrospect and on final reflection and course feedback.

First, a six-week process introduced students to the basic theory of searching and synthesising information and perspective. The topics were current general knowledge issues. The students chose one of the topics generated by the lecturer/researcher but were allowed to choose their own, with lecturer approval. Each group of four students then presented their research in the format of a PowerPoint presentation, with all four students participating. As a penultimate step in this first round, they handed in a ten-page group project based on a marking rubric as the criteria. Finally, each group had to decide in what way they were going to carry out their research project steps (gathering information individually and putting it together collaboratively for presentation) was beneficial to them. Students were asked to group themselves into groups of four according to an overlapping specialization subject they were currently studying. Again, an element of choice was introduced in terms of focus sub-topic within a specific discipline in which they were majoring as teaching subjects The topic had to be curriculum compliant. The students then produced first an oral presentation of their ideas and proposals, and then submitted a written completed project which indicates how, and at what level, the unit/sub-topic would be taught. The outcome of the project was a set of teaching materials, with theoretical motivations for the content and pedagogy in which it was to be conveyed. The student group's reflective comments were handed in together with the project, as an addendum in order for the lecturer/researcher to measure the impact, or perceived impact on student agency, voice, confidence and power.

In the second cycle, in August and September, data were collected and there were five sets of data.

Set 1 Student feedback in the Addendums to the projects in Cycle 2

Set 2 student feedback in the Addendums to the projects Cycle 3.

Questions: How and to what extent did you benefit from conducting a

collaborative research project in Cycle 2/Cycle3?

Set 3 Transcribed follow-up focus interviews (optional)

Set 4 Question: Test results on research theory, concepts and processes

Set 5 Student group marks for the materials developed

Questions: Do these deal with in depth expanded knowledge in relation to the basic minimum requirements/ textbook versions?

Are the materials infused with multiple alternative perspectives on the topic?

Do the materials prompt ethical action, social justice and awareness of the importance of communities of practice, socially and in the classroom?

Results

There was no set curriculum for teaching of LOLT. Therefore, we were obliged to do a needs analysis of the course where the students were asked to say what they learnt in the past two years and what they felt they needed to be taught in writing. Among other things, they were anxious to be taught CV writing, letter of motivation, formal letters, report writing and presentation skills because they said they would need these skills once they graduate from the university. At the end of the report, students were asked to say what they learnt from the project and a good number of responses reflected the following:

Group 2: *We were able to work with very little supervision and managing the whole project by ourselves. We were also able to evaluate our work and that of others and making judgements about the value of information and drawing conclusions from data. We did not have the right answers but were forced to devise strategies to work towards solutions. We also presented our work to our peers and received critiques which boosted our confidence. This confidence motivated us to use our initiative to make decisions instead of waiting for approval to do basic tasks but we also made sure we reported back to the lecturers at the appropriate times.*

Group 1: *The skills we learnt as a group was to listen and accommodate each person's opinion. When in disagreement, we would solve it together as a group. We also learnt how to interact with the people who responded to the questionnaires.*

Group 3: *We honestly learnt from each other who participated in this project. We also learnt that the key of your future is in your hands and everyone has his own opinion to anything which boil down to choices. In addition, this project taught me how to manage time appropriately. We found that it is not easy to do research because people are not always willing to participate and it takes a great deal of persuasion to get a particular individual to take part.*

Group 4: *We discovered ... music inspires and most certainly have a positive impact on the greater amount of people that we interviewed. We learnt that music is not only an art, it is a 'go to' to get the day going. It is the sound that gets certain listeners hyped up, it is the lyric they can relate to. We learnt data analysis skills and to connect the ideas of different people to one another.*

Group 5*: We learnt Communication skills and found that it is illegal to ask someone's age and name to publish it in our report … We developed critical thinking skills through analysing and interpreting our results. The report raised awareness in our own personal lives because it puts society's attitude into perspective for us.*

Benefits of the research projects to all the participants

Throughout the research project, students were offered the opportunity to assimilate and integrate various skills and subject area knowledge**.** Students could choose their own tasks, set their goals, choose their own resources and produce an independently formally written text. This openness suggests that students experienced themselves as truly in control of their own learning. It should be noted that students who ventured into statistical data design and analysis successfully, did so under good guidance.

Common sense notions of how companies are structured and run were questioned. The knowledge and culture students brought with them into the LOLT course, and into the school were aknowledged and mobilized through the research project. Students presented their findings to the class. Hard copies of the project were made available to all students as a resource. The students gained a voice in the academic life of pre-service teaching by presenting their research findings to their peers. In this forum a shift in identity took place from LOLT. Through involvement in the research project, lecturers could examine their own teaching methodologies. Lecturers gained insights into what students achieved in terms of integrating the types of skills they had been encouraged to acquire in the LOLT. They could see evidence of how each student had fared in internalizing those skills in a task of advanced complexity. The overall level of the academic standards traditionally expected from LOLT students was raised. The purpose of a LOLT course became more explicit to all participants through the project work. The course itself, which was one of the courses previously viewed as peripheral within a teaching context, gained considerable status. Although the research project requirement might indicate that LOLT is becoming more demanding and potentially more excluding, this is not so. The spirit in which the projects are handled is that each student works within his/her area of specialization.

It was mentioned, correctly, that literacy foundations need to be set before the age of six. Global statistics confirm this observation. But we as teacher educators are situated in higher education and can break the cycle right here, by making students aware of how they are situated in terms of their own language performance in a variety of official languages and how this compares globally, and what it might take to participate in the 'real world'. It would take a strong 'buy-in' and commitment to themselves and their learners. If confidence is an issue, full participation and commitment from students will take some time to set in. Students will learn how to learn and that 'being in class, listening passively and handing in assignments' is not enough in terms of 'taking responsibility for your own education'. A commitment to oneself requires considerable reading and writing, much time set aside to do this, and great individual effort. This kind of turn around requires re-curriculation and a new kind of web-integrated pedagogy.

Implications for discipline-specific English language development

One of the most useful ways in which students can make an impact on curricula is by producing their own texts and projects of enquiry. By generating original texts and presenting them orally or in written form to fellow learners and members of faculty they are engaging in the creation and dissemination of new knowledge and presenting this knowledge to different audiences in a variety of different ways.

Singh and Heiman (2019) discuss the merits of what they refer to as research as a basis for curriculum development. This innovation is meant to suggest that defamiliarisation gives room to students to co-construct knowledge (Rozina, 2015). By giving students the opportunity to interact with their lecturers as fellow-academics, a context for teachers thinking together with their students (community of practice) comes to the fore; in line with constructivism and defamiliarisation (Hibbert 2018). The nature of the research described by both Singh and Heiman (2019) is essentially inward-looking research, with academic activity as a theme around which participants engage with each other. "Outward-looking" student-generated topics and initiatives such as the one we have described here present valuable opportunities for academic and language development.

In this regard, academic development for the purposes of this article can be defined as the provision of "scaffolding" (Singh & Heiman, 2019) or the systematic provision of an induction process into academic discourse, as well as the establishment of an instructiveness with that discourse. The term academic development as it is used here therefore does not refer to the making up of shortfalls which students might have, but means rather: enabling a learner to solve a problem of carry out a task which she/he would be unable to do unassisted, and gradually removing the scaffolding in a process of moving towards independent

learning (Singh & Heiman, 2019).

We highlight the importance of careful task-design as a central factor in presenting meaningful academic development courses. The following questions from Schoor, Bennert, and Brünken (2012, p. 761) are useful guidelines:

- What exactly do I want to teach students?
- Does the content act as a vehicle for any other skill or knowledge?
- Is it possible to grade tasks sequentially in such a way that each student builds up a bank of skills with which to tackle tasks of increasing complexity? If the task is theoretical, how does it relate to professional practice?
- How can the demands of a specific task explore the relationship between theory and practice?
- To what degree is it possible to make the task or topic negotiable?
- How can tasks be mediated more clearly by lecturers?
- How can questions be phrased in order to elicit original responses?
- Is it useful to give an exact breakdown of marks allocated in order to enable students to improve their self-monitoring practices?

Finally, initiating students into research processes such as this, seems to help in developing a consciousness in different ways of thinking critically and responding to what has been read (Foncha, Abongdia, & Kepe, 2018).

Conclusion

Apart from the advantages of students reflecting on their own academic writing, the research project given to the students was meant to provoke their critical thinking skills as described in Hibbert (2018) by creating an opportunity for them to deliberate upon, and challenge one another's thinking. Based on this startegy, it was envisaged that students would collaboratively develop problem-solving techniques and build self-confidence which is an important variable to be addressed in language learning situations where creative management and critical thinking are central. Thus, if students explore reflexivity, they will learn to look at themselves and the world differently, which is what we, as teacher educators, need to do.

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Note on Contributors

Dr Liesel Hibbert is Associate Professor of English Education at the Department SPFET, Faculty of Education, Mowbray Campus, Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). She has authored the monograph entitled 'The Linguistic Landscape in Post-Apartheid South Africa – Politics and Discourse' and co-authored a book entitled "Multilingual Universities in South Africa – Reflecting Society in Higher Education". Email: lhibbert@cput.ac.za

Dr John Wankah Foncha is a senior lecturer in Language Education at the Department SPFET, Faculty of Education, Mowbray Campus, Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). His research interests are: literacy with particular focus on identities in higher education, reading and writing pedagogies and intercultural communication competence. Email: fonchaj@cput.ac.za